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SUBJECT: Turkey and Biotechnology

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: The development of biotechnology legislation has been identified as a priority by the new Turkish government. Regulations that parallel EU directives have been drafted, however no action has been taken to put them into place. With the possible exception of the Cartagena Biosafety Protocol, which the Turkish Parliament recently ratified, there are no biotech regulations that impact U.S. trade. There is concern that a small number of influential officials are spreading misinformation about the safety of food and agricultural products developed using biotechnology that will ultimately have a negative effect on consumer perception and future legislation. Local food and agricultural companies are concerned yet remain quiet. Annually, the United States exports approximately \$250 million of corn and soybean products for feed, up to \$100 million of corn and soybean oil and \$200 million of cotton to Turkey. End Summary.

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Current and Potential Legislation

¶2. (SBU) Biotechnology regulations in Turkey are limited to a 1998 directive on field trials, which have since been suspended (see Para 3). While many industry observers expect the void of regulation to continue, bureaucrats insist that legislation will be published soon. There are a few signs that regulations are inevitable. First, Turkey ratified the Cartagena Biosafety Protocol on June 17, 2003. If Turkey chooses to implement the biosafety protocol, some type of regulatory framework will be needed. Sources also indicate that Turkey has until 2005 to harmonize its regulations with relevant EU directives in preparation for accession talks. Finally, the Genetics Laboratory at the Ankara Provincial Control Laboratory of Molecular Biology has been newly staffed and equipped and is awaiting legislation to begin their work to test imports and domestic products for GMO content.

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The brief regulatory history

¶3. (SBU) In Turkey, regulations pertaining to the use and importation of genetically modified organisms began when the "Directive on the Principles of Field Trials of Genetically Modified Organisms" issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MARA), entered into force in May 1998. Note: This directive did not apply to, or otherwise affect feed and food trade. End Note. After this date, several field experiments with GMO crops were carried out in different agronomic research institutes in the country. Specific crops tested were corn, cotton and potatoes. In June 1999, the Ministry of Environment, through a circular, warned all prefectures regarding the unauthorised planting and use of genetically modified plants.

¶4. (SBU) Subsequently, an interagency commission on "biotechnology and biosafety" which was established in the framework of the Eighth Five-year Development Plan of the State Planning Organisation issued a report stating that the importation and experimental planting of genetically modified seeds, authorised by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, was hazardous, considering that Turkey lacks regulation in the field, and qualified personnel to ensure the controls. The commission requested that the experiments be discontinued immediately, and that no other authorisation be issued until the completion of legislation and mechanisms of control.

¶5. (SBU) As a result, there has been no additional field

testing of biotech crops in Turkey. While results of the initial tests have been analysed by the Directorate of Research and Development of MARA, the results - to the frustration of industry participants and the scientific community - have not been made public. Again, the suspension of this directive had no impact on trade. Despite the potential benefits of producing BT corn and cotton in Turkey, it is unlikely to occur in the near future. Monsanto, a large biotech seed developer, has abandoned plans to introduce biotech seeds in Turkey, and is instead producing and exporting conventional corn seeds which it markets to the EU.

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A near ban and lessons learned

16. (SBU) In July of 2000 MARA began developing regulations which would prohibit imports of all food and feed products not accompanied by 'GMO-free' certificates. While originally intending the ban to be immediate while legislation was developed, it was later announced to go into effect on January 1, 2001. In the end, pressure from industry groups - primarily the poultry industry and feed millers association - convinced the GOT to suspend implementation altogether. The significance of these events is that the GOT began to recognise that this issue has greater economic implications for its domestic industries than anticipated. Since this event, the GOT has been much more engaged with industry participants. Further, the GOT enlisted the Turkish Council of Scientific and Technical Research (TBYTAK) to help develop legislation and a national biosafety system taking into consideration international standards.

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Recent draft legislation and references

17. (SBU) In 2001, two draft directives were prepared, one relating to the registration of genetically modified plants, the other to the deliberate release of the GMOs into the environment and their placement on the market. While these directives never went into effect, they drew heavily if not exclusively from relevant EU directives. It is fair to expect that future legislation will also be designed to conform to EU directives as well as the Biosafety Protocol. The Accession Partnership document approved by the EU Council on March 8, 2001 sets harmonisation with environmental acquis communautaire as a medium term objective. The National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis, presented by Turkey on March 19 2001, establishes that the final objective concerning the deliberate release into environment and the placing on the market of genetically modified organisms in Turkey is to adopt and apply pertinent EU legislation.

18. (SBU) The Biotechnology and Biosafety Advisory Committee, which includes representatives from MARA, Environment, Health, Forestry, State Planning Office, and the Undersecretariat of Foreign Trade has also prepared a draft law for the establishment of a National Biosafety Council, which in turn is intended to establish the national biosafety system and legislation. It is not clear to what extent the Biosafety Advisory Committee and the National Biosafety Council remain intact since the election of a new government in 2002 and the appointment of a new Prime Minister in 2003. An official at the Undersecretariat of Foreign Trade indicated that the Biosafety Advisory Committee would be 'formed' in February of 2004.

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Biotech atmosphere in the Turkish bureaucracy

19. (SBU) Many MARA officials have been publicly supportive of biotechnology and the potential benefits the technology may hold for Turkish producers. Many others - in key positions - are quite skeptical and misinformed and as a result are actually spreading misinformation about the safety of biotechnology to their colleagues and superiors. For example, after hearing a sound science-based presentation on the safety of bio-engineered foods from another scientist, a Turkish biologist responded that she would still never eat 'those foods'. A general lack of information prevails.

10. (SBU) The Turkish Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MARA) has been relatively proactive to opening the debate on biotechnology within the GOT. Recently, MARA officials approached FAS to host a seminar on biotechnology in September. Much of this interest can be attributed to ongoing outreach efforts and training activities that engaged the GOT in the biotech debate.

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Atmosphere in the food and agricultural sectors  
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¶11. (SBU) Many food companies are more concerned about public perception than impending Turkish regulations. Coca-Cola and Pepsi, for example, require that all starch-based sweeteners that they purchase be produced from non-GMO corn. There is no law that requires this. Many companies want to ensure that their ability to export to the EU is preserved. Some major food companies have received calls from consumers asking if there are bio-engineered foods in their products. In a recent meeting, these food companies said there was a need for all major food companies to respond to these concerns with one voice and one message. Many other food companies prefer the status quo: no regulations and no consumer awareness. While many of these food companies recognize that they would benefit from educating consumers and the GOT on issues related to biotechnology and food safety, it is uncharted territory in Turkey.

¶12. (SBU) In the next year, more outreach will be needed to assist food and agricultural companies communicate effectively with their customers and the GOT. Even if the best regulations are adopted, consumer acceptance of biotechnology will be a major challenge in Turkey.

¶13. (SBU) Conclusion: As Turkey recently ratified the biosafety protocol, one can expect that regulations governing the importation and marketing of biotech products will soon follow. Turkey is challenged by the dual need to implement the biosafety protocol and develop comprehensive regulations that adhere to EU directives. Experience suggests that Turkey will protect the local feed industry, yet may cave to perceived consumer concerns and implement restrictive policies for biotech content in consumer foods. In other words, future regulations will likely have a greater impact on food products than feed products, and it is not likely that Turkey will revisit field trials and planting approvals until the EU progresses in this area. While the U.S. market for \$250 million in feed ingredients and \$200 million in cotton do not appear to be in jeopardy, approximately \$100 million in vegetable oil and corn and soy food products may face restrictive regulations in the near future.

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